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A Teenager Goes Guideless in the Tetons: Part 2 of a Climber's Memoir

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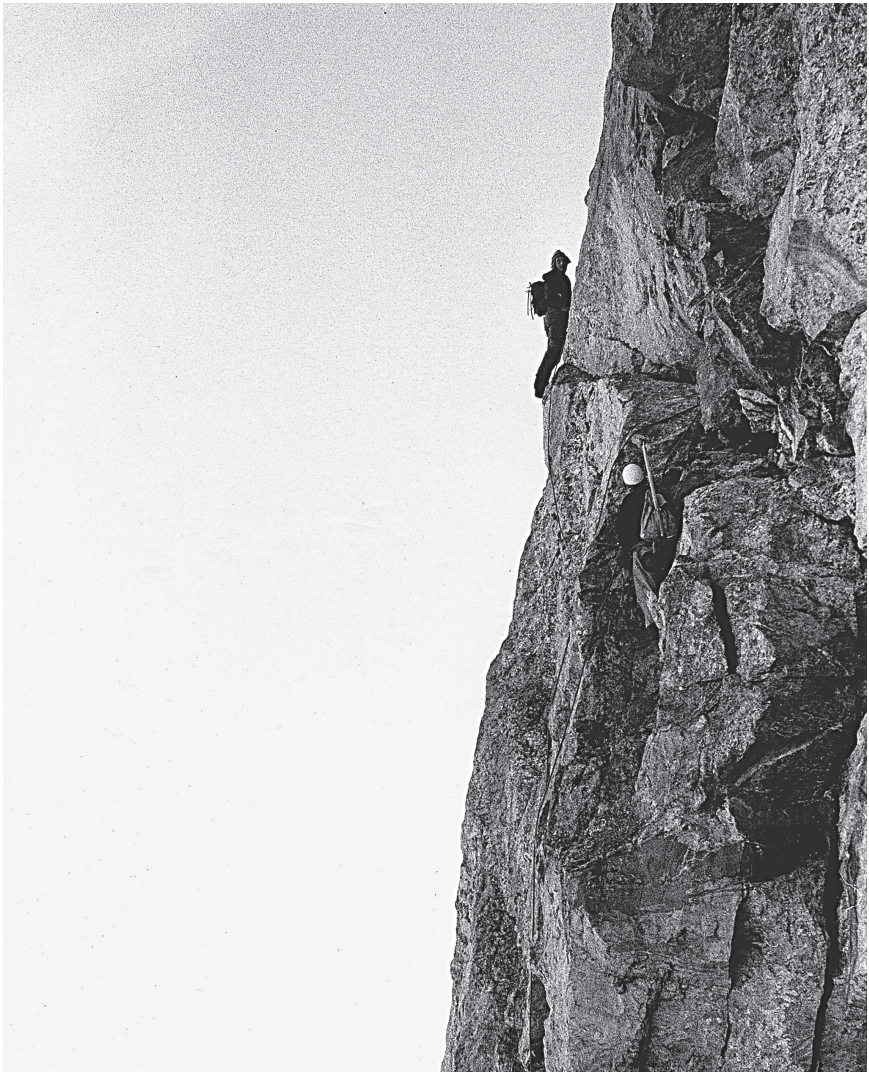

Editor's note: In our last issue, Steven Jervis wrote of going to the Tetons alone at age 15. He followed guide Glenn Exum up Grand Teton and scaled other major peaks. Now, he tells of going back over the next few years and exploring some new climbs on his own.

I accepted George Evans's unexpected invitation to join him in the Tetons in early July 1954. George was one of the younger Appalachian Mountain Club climbers in the Shawangunk Mountains in southeastern New York State, but he was still three years my senior and an undergraduate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I had not had much contact with the Evans family other than being reprimanded for reckless climbing by George's father.

In earlier days, AMC climbers had made a mighty impact in the Tetons. In 1929, Robert Underhill (*Appalachia* editor from 1928 to 1934) and Ken Henderson (who was in charge of the journal's Alpina section for 33 years) pioneered the East Ridge of Grand Teton. Amazingly, this intricate route was only the second to be done on the mountain, two years before Glenn Exum's solo. Two years later Underhill returned to the Grand for the first ascent of the forbidding North Ridge.

I was guideless now. The AMC presence that summer was modest. Our Gunks training had not prepared us for Wyoming's big mountains, where speed is essential, as we discovered on the East Ridge of Nez Percé, a Robert Underhill classic from 1931. George and I were accompanied by Bill Cropper, another AMC Gunky. Bill was a strong partner, but this third person impeded our already slow progress. The East Ridge is a complicated affair, with rappels from two subsummits. To make these easier, George had brought a light rappel line. It was very thin indeed, and it left a nasty rope burn when it slid onto my bare neck. The climb is not technically difficult if you know where you are going. Because we often didn't know, it was almost sunset when we reached the top. The descent is easy, but one does not wish to fall off. Thus my first mountain bivouac.

I had never been so high without sunshine or a sleeping bag; it can get pretty cold at 12,000 feet, even in summer. We paced about for warmth and

Steven Jervis, in the white helmet, belays Pete Carman as he leads their climb of the North Face of Grand Teton, in the early 1960s. HENRY ABRONS

managed intermittent sleep. At first light we hurried down to the valley to assure the rangers at the checkout station that we were fine, really we were, and they need not send a rescue party.

George and I next climbed the Exum Ridge without being benighted. Now, for something harder. From Jenny Lake, the Grand looks like a stroll: just head west and keep going. But we knew that then we would encounter a gap of several thousand feet; we would find ourselves not on the Grand at all but atop the aptly named Disappointment Peak. This would not be the summit we had hoped for. To make the ascent from this side, we must undertake the challenging East Ridge. Because of its altitude and tricky route-finding, it remains a serious proposition.

George and I hiked up to the base camp at Amphitheater Lake, a gorgeous spot favored by climbers and bears. Bill Cropper was not with us; on an earlier attempt, he had been injured when the edge of a snow gully gave way as he was bridging to adjacent rock. We started early from the lake, but as we approached the first technical section, ominous clouds swept in. We retreated to our camp, packed it up, and headed down to Jenny Lake. There we met Ellis Blade. "I think you should have kept going," he said. "You would have had a good time." Maybe so: No bad weather ensued. But I remembered these words eight years later, when Ellis led a much too big AMC group on a dangerous route on the Grand. They encountered a storm—a really bad one—and spent two nights out in miserable conditions. One young climber died.

A few days later George and I returned to Amphitheater Lake, determined. The next morning was blue and sunny, and we soon passed our previous high point. The East Ridge is complicated by two great towers, dramatically visible from north and south. How to get around them? We had picked up a lot of what today's climbers call "beta" (information about the climb). Beta said pass the first tower on the left (the first ascent party had gone right), the second on the right. This meant following a snow couloir (cautiously—this is where Bill Cropper fell) and striking the ridge above the first tower, known as the Molar Tooth after its two prongs. The snow was kind to us, and soon we had gained the ridge proper. The second tower was intimidating. We had to pass it to the north, in the cooling afternoon shadows. I started up a wide, obvious crack. It was damp and unwelcoming. Once up this pitch, however, we were past the difficulties and only about 1,000 feet from the top. But we had again been slow; it was late, we were tired, and the exposure was considerable. We tried to hurry along. The last thing we wanted was another chilly bivouac. My ice

axe, one of the ash-shafted ones we used in those days, clattered as it dangled heavily from my wrist. The route, if you picked it right, was little more than scrambling, but we reached the summit only toward evening.

There is a relatively quick way down to Amphitheater Lake, but it follows a steep snow couloir. We chose the long, easy descent into Garnet Canyon, then branched to the trail to the lake. The only drawback is that the last few miles are uphill, disagreeable after 20 hours of climbing. I recall the last hour and a half as my most tedious, ever. When we reached the lake at midnight, we found that a bear had visited our tent, without benign intent.

It was now August, and several more AMC members showed up. First came a strong climber and his surly, non-climbing wife. Several more appeared, and we moved into the couple's campsite. We thought this was club camaraderie, but the couple saw it as an intrusion and became very angry indeed. As soon as we could, we moved into another campsite.

By now I was the more eager for the arrival of my (slightly older) high school climbing partners, Mike Wortis and Steve Mann. They were driving Mike's 1941 wood-sided Ford station wagon from Spokane, where they had spent a remunerative eight weeks canning peas at a Green Giant factory. Days passed, snow melted, and lupine grew in the meadows. At last, one day they showed up in a burst of campground dust. In Washington, Mike had taken the first leader fall any of us had incurred. Not serious, but a reminder of our vulnerability.

With only a few weeks remaining of our summer, we hurried up to the peaks. It was Steve and Mike's first time in the range, so I repeated the Exum Ridge with them. On the trail down from Garnet Canyon, we skipped the long switchbacks and roared straight down the grassy slopes. This was a speedy but destructive method; it caused significant erosion and would be soon prohibited. Then we had a go at the enormous and poorly defined—that is, confusing—south face of Storm Point. Halfway up I led what was for me a hard pitch and embarked on another. I was stopped by an intimidating overhang. Mike took over and solved the problem in fine style. That's one reason I liked to climb with him. I was sure that we had made a new route and reported it accordingly. But the description never went into the guidebook. It was mentioned only as a "subsequent early climb."

The three of us joined Bill Buckingham for Rock of Ages, a sharp crag above a beautiful lake. I have only two memories: The approach couloir was loose and frightening, and the key pitch led up and right across a steep face.

I tried to lead it but backed off in favor of Bill, who said, "It looks goable," and went right up. This was not the last time that Bill would take over for me.

All too soon, it was time to begin our drive back East. We stopped at Devils Tower, on the far side of Wyoming. I had been entranced and frightened by this strange formation rising a thousand feet above the plain ever since, at age 8, I had seen it on the cover of *Natural History* magazine. We knew we had no chance of climbing it because the Park Service was known to discourage severely such efforts. Nevertheless, we decided to inquire, just in case.

"You want to go up there today?" the ranger asked. It was 10 A.M.

We concealed our amazement and said the next day would be just fine. To our knowledge there were only two routes on the Tower: Fritz Wiessner's from 1937 and Jack Durrance's leaning column route first climbed the following year. Wiessner, a specialist on such terrain, had climbed a difficult crack, placing a single piton a long way up. We headed for Durrance's column instead.

There are two serious pitches on the Durrance: the broken column and a wide crack above. We drew straws for leading. Mike got the column, I the crack. The leaning column looks as though it had been tipped over for climbers. It was unexpectedly balancey, and I was glad of Mike's top rope. My pitch was much longer but presented no route-finding problems. My right foot went into the (very convenient) off-width gap between the column and the wall, while a serendipitous crack a few feet left accommodates the other foot. The only problem on the route is that the crack gives out near the end. I must commit myself to the gap. Today, this pitch is graded 5.6+,[1] pretty challenging for kids like us. After that it's hardly a scramble to the huge, nearly flat summit.

When we got down that early afternoon, clanking with hardware, a family of tourists took our picture. We felt like heroes—for about ten minutes.

Two years later, in 1956, Mike and I returned to Devils Tower with our Harvard Mountaineering Club partner, Dave Toland. We climbed an aid route several columns right of the Durrance, using flimsy pitons left by army troops who had been practicing there. A bunch of these lay unused at the base of the climb. All Mike remembers is getting his foot stuck in a crack and wondering whether he could ever free it without breaking his ankle.

Afterwards we ran into Jim McCarthy, whose presence was a sign of change. He created a number of routes on the Tower's longer and harder

1 The Yosemite Decimal System rates technical climbs from 5.1 to 5.15, with 5.1 the easiest.

north side. One recent year, 5,000 people reached the top of the Tower. Our 1954 ascent had been only the 41st. (I later learned that George Evans had been there before us.)

Going back one year to continue the chronology: In 1955, I graduated from high school and expanded my mountaineering destinations: Wyoming's Wind Rivers and Alberta's Selkirks. But, in between, Mike Wortis and I had a few weeks in the Tetons. We undertook the south face of Symmetry Spire—we thought by a new route until we found the first piton halfway up. Once more we wandered up the south side of Storm Point with no idea where we were going. We'll never know whether this was a new route, even in part. The guidebook[2] forgoes description of the face; it just quotes Willi Unsoeld: "a real wilderness of broken walls, ridges which disappear, and gullies which lead nowhere."

We needed to conclude with something adventurous. I had been 15 years old when Bob Merriam told me about the Red Sentinel: "this remarkable chisel-like pinnacle," as the guidebook says. Hans Kraus, the leading Shawangunks climber of his day, had made several attempts from the northwest side but was stymied 30 feet from the top. In 1950, it was one of the few remaining unclimbed points in the range. On a rare collective day off from guiding duties, Dick Pownall, Leigh Ortenburger, Mike Brewer, and Bob Merriam had reached the summit, starting on the east face, then turning onto the very exposed north. More than 60 years later, when he was in his 90s, Bob sent me a narrative he had written for a publication in North Carolina, where he had been living in retirement. He led the second pitch: "relentlessly vertical. . . . There is nothing climbable near our corner position. It looks possible, however, to traverse about ten feet onto the face on tiny ledges. . . . Now irreversibly committed. . . . Can't release a hold for selecting and driving a piton. . . . Breathing hard, hug the face and look around. . . . More than 40 feet above Dick now." Finally, to his vast relief, Bob does manage to place a piton. The way to the top remains difficult, but at least he has some protection.

In 1955, when Mike and I attempted it, the Red Sentinel had seen almost no subsequent ascents. I led the first pitch so that Mike could have the second, harder one. The first, originally led by Dick Pownall, starts up a jam crack, then goes right to an airy belay. I climbed the crack and clipped the

2 The guidebook I refer to in this essay is the classic *A Climber's Guide to the Teton Range*, 3rd edition, by Leigh N. Ortenburger and Reynold G. Jackson (Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers, 1996).

On a summer day in 1955, Jervis rappels down the Red Sentinel, a pinnacle almost no one had climbed in five years. MICHAEL WORTIS

piton at its top, took one look at the traverse, and went back down. I slowly worked up my determination and climbed back up to the piton. Rather than embarrass myself with a second retreat, I made my way across the traverse ("delicate," says the guidebook) and clipped the belay. Then it was Mike's turn. Many decades later he still recalls the first intimidating moves onto the north face, as well as manteling on a jutting crystal farther along. Whatever he encountered did not long impede him. When we reached the top, we could not find a register to sign. But we were there. Really. I have a photo to prove it.

I had already said farewell to high school. And to the Tetons—though not for very long.

Afterword

In college from 1955 to 1959 I accompanied Harvard Mountaineering Club friends to Canada and Peru. But the Tetons still drew me in. Sometime in the early 1960s, I did finally climb the North Face of the Grand, which had been on my to-do list since 1952. I would not have made it without the assistance of younger and stronger Harvard climbers. I owe a special debt to Pete Carman for leading me over the top two pitches, the hardest on the route (see the photo). But I never did succeed on the Grand's North Ridge, a prime Robert Underhill route from 1931. I was all prepared. Leigh Ortenburger had told me how to manage the crux chockstone: Start by facing out, then swing around past the stone. I never was able to try this. Bob Page, Leif-Norman Patterson, and I started off for the Grandstand, the huge bluff from which the Ridge (really an edge or corner) begins. Getting there is mostly a scramble, but the line is confusing. And you have to worry about rocks tumbling down from the North Face. By the time we three were atop the Grandstand, it was nearly noon and clouding up ominously. The ridge looked very forbidding, and we retreated. I wondered at the audacity of Underhill and Fritiof Fryxell who had pioneered it so many years before, when there were so few other routes on the mountain. These days, the top of the Grandstand is often reached by traversing from the Lower Saddle.

Even bolder was Bob Page's and my attempt in the early 1960s on the direct South Buttress of Mount Moran. On the first ascent in 1953, its key pitch took some seven hours. Dick Emerson, a park ranger and one of the best climbers in the vicinity, led that climb, which required a daring pendulum from a partially driven wafer (very thin) piton. When finally freed

in 1979, it was rated 5.12–. I doubt that Bob and I could have managed it anyway, but we'll never know because the easier part of the route took us so long that we had to bivouac. It was a chilly night, aggravated by thirst. Dawn revealed Jackson Lake in all its watery blue, thousands of feet below us. We rushed down and never went near the South Buttress again.

In 2016, after more than 40 years, I returned to the Tetons. I was 79. My intent was to reclimb the Durrance Ridge of Symmetry—my first route in the range at age 15, 64 years earlier. I hired a guide, just as in 1952. Much had changed. Instead of half a dozen guides, the Exum service had about 40. And there was another service with 20. Fees had exploded; instead of $20, I would pay $575 for a full day. But it would be worth it, for such an end to my Tetons career—and to this memoir. To my surprise, my guide told me that Symmetry had declined in popularity. He had never done the Durrance and was unsure of the route into the approach gully. The path that I recalled from long before had vanished.

We started up a rocky bushwhack. Almost immediately I fell backward and bloodied my arm. I tried to continue, but clearly this was not my day, or my year. The September morning was crisp and sunny. I could see Symmetry, with its enticing routes, as though they were only a few hundred feet away. But they were too far for me. This was not how I had hoped to conclude this account, but sometimes the mountains make your choices for you.

Steven Jervis is the editor of this journal's Alpina section, a lifelong climber, and former English professor at Brooklyn College.